

# Orange and Windsor Counties Listening Session Notes

**Date:** 2/22/24 (public session) & 2/23/24 (service provider session)

**Location:** Virtual – VAAFAM staff joined the White River/Ottawaquechee Natural Resources Conservation District (NRCD) [Local Working Group Meetings](#) for the public and service providers

**Partner(s):** White River Natural Resources Conservation District (NRCD) - ***Both of these meetings were coordinated and facilitated by White River NRCD Manager Jennifer Byrne (and her team); VAAFAM staff attended in a listening capacity only.***

**Attendees:** 30+ attendees (including VAAFAM staff)

## Common Acronyms

**VAAFAM:** Vermont Agency of Agriculture, Food, and Markets

**VHCB:** Vermont Housing and Conservation Board

**NRCS:** Natural Resource Conservation Service

**NRCD:** Natural Resource Conservation District

## Notes as Followed

### Agricultural Plastics

- We used to get paid for recycling ag plastics, and now we have to pay to throw them away in the landfill
- Connecticut River Watershed Farmers Alliance is working towards a pilot effort to recycle one bale of plastic by summer 2024
- There is an interest amongst farmers to have options to recycle plastics, but there is not infrastructure in place to support this

### Farming Infrastructure

Manure application schedule

- Need more infrastructure to hold manure and spread in the spring when most plant available
- Desire for solution to moving manure other than waiting for it to freeze in the winter
- Costs of waste management can be a huge deal breaker for dairy farms
- Explore joint manure lagoon funding opportunities

- NRCS is funding many waste management systems – sometimes these approaches don't work for smaller scaled farms
- As winters are increasingly warmer there is just too much mud
- Perhaps we could figure out a semi-confined winter system for some Vermont farms? VHCB grants funded a lot of bedded packs

#### Fencing infrastructure needed

- Also important job creation strategy

#### Silvopasture support needed

- Need support for conversion to pasture by logging and creating more open land
- This is a different focus than currently available silvopasture resources

#### Flood Recovery and Preparedness Efforts

- Worried about the delay in funding to help farmers recover from flood losses
- Worried about communities getting flooded again
- Union Village Dam pilot project – work with landowners along the tributaries to store water higher up in the watershed and slow down water coming into the reservoir
  - Possibly Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS) Wetland Restoration Program or Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (CREP)/Trees for Streams projects
  - Possibly Stormwater management practices
  - Interest in focusing along the Ompompanoosuc River watershed
  - Think about using farms as filters and carbon sponge
  - Importance of starting higher in the watershed; value of beavers in the system
- Conversation around terracing in the watershed as an adopted and understood practice
- RedStart forestry has funding to work with landowners to fell trees and create more carbon storage in the watershed (White River watershed in Stafford area)

#### Interest in local work group effort in the United States Virgin Islands experience

- Focus on workforce development program: [https://www.canva.com/design/DAF7h-dBKAE/XoyRQmdxwR-IZUlvTjbEWA/view?utm\\_content=DAF7h-dBKAE&utm\\_campaign=designshare&utm\\_medium=link&utm\\_source=editor](https://www.canva.com/design/DAF7h-dBKAE/XoyRQmdxwR-IZUlvTjbEWA/view?utm_content=DAF7h-dBKAE&utm_campaign=designshare&utm_medium=link&utm_source=editor)

#### Land and Capital Access

- Difficult to find good land at a scale that is economically viable
- Property taxes also make it difficult to retain agricultural land

#### Program Accessibility

- Need to centralize available resources
- Farmers are too busy to seek out funding availability, so miss opportunities
- This is a support area needed to help farms access money
- Promote the programs by the farmer watershed groups
- Shared Franklin County NRCD resource:  
<https://www.franklincountynrcd.org/agproducersguide>
- Farmers need providers to call them to share resources since they are too busy to know what is available
- Pilot projects with farmers leading the charge can be very impactful, if farmers are given the space and funding to support them
- Curious about continued exploration of nutrient management practices that don't look like manure pits
- Some farmers have been frustrated feeling that the cost share for high tunnels has been high
- Grants are easier to navigate for established farms with cash flow and equity; they are much more opaque and harder to access and navigate for newer farms

What about creating one program, one deadline?

- How to ensure that the program and funding offerings are reliable and predictable?
- White River NRCD offers Farm Team support to farmers to help with equitable service, help coordinate offerings
- Can there be one, universal application process to streamline access to both federal and state grants?
- NRCS will see lots of funding through Inflation Reduction Act in support of Climate Smart programs
  - Might be useful to have some calls to share more about these practices and discuss 'bundling' of practices for a suite of projects in the same contract
- Farmers support bundled work, and want to be "hired" at the cost of production for their practices
- It is very hard for farmers when there is high turnover of service providers to have stability in nutrient, resource and business management support, especially when there are many newer folks coming in who are less familiar with the production styles, businesses and have less experience

### **Vermont Marketing and Value Chain**

Value Chain considerations

- Need for diversified food system
- Specifically need support for mobile pastured poultry units

Need for unifying agriculture

- Division around small vs big farm operations causing some negative messaging
- Need to also work across commodity groups and this needs to be emphasized and supported

Tough to compete in Vermont

- Milk price and state supports in Vermont are not enough to be viable
- Tax credit support for buying new assets currently offered in the state of New York
- Hard to compete with neighboring states that receive additional price supports

Wants Agency of Agriculture, Food, and Markets (AAFM) to promote messaging of “Vermont Makes it Special” again

- This effort was really helpful and valuable
- Out of state promotion and marketing our VT agriculture and food products

Affordability of local yarn production

- Looking for ways we can make local fiber production more affordable
- Strategies for incorporating fiber into agritourism efforts and promotion of importance to clothing ourselves

### **Voice and Culture of Farmers**

Ensure farmers have a voice

- Need a list of those that can provide services to farmers
- Ensure those service providers are connected and have aligned recommendations as opposed to opposing suggestions
- Heather Blunk sends out a regular funding newsletter – great source!
- It’s too much of a burden on the farmers to process through this on their own

Culture of farmers

- Farmers are often introverted, don’t talk to one another enough
- Aren’t aware of and don’t have access to all the resources available
- Support for generational transition of farms

Local feast celebration

- Opportunity for community to get to know one another and share resources
- Share local food – breaking bread together
- Or host local food potlucks at the local community level
- Share greatest goals for community
- Needs some coordinating support
- Use as an opportunity to connect area grocery stores to local producers

Need positive story telling about agriculture

- Farmers have passion, positiveness to share
- It’s important to share how much farmers care
- Examples of consumers and community members that find living next to farms helps them connect to local food

- Local, small farm community vibe still exists in Orange County

Can we get Ag in the Classroom back in the classroom earlier than high school?

- New England Dairy is supporting this with Adopt a Cow program
- Miller Farm also has a program of getting their milk into schools